

## THE SCRUB-WOMAN

*Bodenheim, Maxwell, 1892-1954*

(A Sentimental Poem)

TIME has placed his careful insult  
Upon your body.  
In other ages Time gave rags  
To hags without riches, but now he brings  
Cotton, calico, and muslin —  
Tokens of his admiration  
For broken backs.  
Neat nonsense, stamped with checks and stripes,  
Fondles the deeply marked sneer  
That Time has dropped upon you.  
While Time, in one of his well-debated moods  
That men call an age, is attending to his manners,  
I shall scan the invisible banners  
Of meaning that unfurl when you move.

### II

W HEN you open your mouths  
I see a well, and strangled chastity  
At the bottom — not chastity  
Of the flesh, but lucid purity  
Of the mind choked by a design  
Of filth that has slowly turned cold,  
Like a sewer intruding  
Upon a small, dead face.  
This is not repulsive.  
Only things alive, with gaudy hollows,  
Can repulse, but your death holds  
A haggard candour that gently thrusts its way  
Into the unimportance of facts.  
You are not old: you were never young.

Life caressed your senses  
With a heavy sterility,  
And you thanked him with the remnant  
Of thought that he left behind —  
His usual moment of absentminded kindness.  
When the muscles of your arm  
Punish the brush that rubs upon wood

I see a rollicking mockery —  
Rhythm in starved pursuit  
Of petrified desire.  
When the palms of your hands  
Stay flat in dirty water  
I can observe your emotions  
Welcome refuse as perfume,  
Intent upon a last ghastly deception.  
When you grunt and touch your hair  
I perceive your exhaustion  
Reaching for a bit of pity  
And carefully rearranging it.

Lift up your pails and go home;  
Take the false tenderness of rest;  
Drop your clothes, disordered, on the floor.  
Vindictive simplicity.